

# Why would Jews vandalize a Holocaust memorial?

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c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) The news that Israel's memorial to Holocaust victims had been graffitied in early June with bitterly anti-Semitic and anti-Israel statements was shocking.

More shocking still was the news that the three men arrested for the crime are Jewish.

How could Jews desecrate the memories of millions of fellow Jews who perished at the hands of the Nazis?

The religious identities of the culprits -- however surprising to many who read of their arrests last Tuesday (June 26) -- did not surprise many Israelis, however. They know that a number of ultra-Orthodox Jews, for religious reasons, believe the State of Israel should not yet exist.

Among ultra-Orthodox Jews, this view is not uncommon. Many interpret passages in religious texts to mean that the messiah must arrive before the State of Israel is reconstituted.

What is uncommon is the willingness to make the point by defiling Yad Vashem, the Hebrew name for Israel's official Holocaust memorial, a nearly sacred civic monument founded in Jerusalem five years after the 1948 establishment of the nation.

"Every religion has its fringe, but these people are the fringe of the fringe," said Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld of Ohev Sholom, a modern Orthodox synagogue in Washington, D.C. "They are very troubled individuals. It's just very disturbing and these people represent nobody but themselves."

Even Jewish groups that promote the idea that the establishment of Israel was a terrible mistake have denounced the vandals. The suspects are three men, ages 18, 26 and 27, who live in Israel and have confessed to the crime, according to police.

Among the statements they painted in Hebrew at the memorial: "If Hitler had not existed, the Zionists would have invented him" and "Jews wake up -- the Zionist regime is dangerous."

Yirmiyahu Cohen, a writer for True Torah Jews, a New York-based group of fervently Orthodox Jews who believe that the Jewish state contradicts Jewish law, said he personally knows the men arrested for the crime, and deplores their actions.

But Cohen also expressed an understanding of the sentiments expressed in their graffiti. "There were Zionists who were complicit in the Holocaust, because they stood by and refused to save Jews, knowing that the destruction of European Jewry would create a political climate conducive to the founding of a Jewish state," he said.

Historians of Zionism point to numerous Zionist efforts to save Jews from the Nazis.

"Jews overwhelmingly believed until not so long ago that the establishment of the Jewish people to their homeland could only take place when the messiah comes," Cohen said.

He pointed to a portion of the Talmud -- ancient rabbinic commentaries on Jewish law -- that states that before the messiah's arrival, Jews must live in exile and should not use "human force" to establish their own nation.

But Herzfeld said that interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and the commentaries is simply "misrepresenting the Torah and the Talmud."